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IR ORFEO: ADAPTED
FROM THE MIDDLE
ENGLISH BY EDWARD
EYRE HUNT



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Sir Orfeo

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Adapted from the Middle English

BY

EDWARD EYRE HUNT



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Introduction

PROFESSOR SCHOFIELD, in his "English Literature from the Norman Conquest to Chaucer,"¹ writes as follows:

"In Celtic tradition there were kings as well as queens of the Otherworld, and they too were known to cast loving eyes on mortals. In 'Sir Orfeo' we have an unusually happy embodiment of this conception in a story where it had originally no place. In the hands of a clever poet the ancient tale of Orpheus and Eurydice became a genuine lay of Britain, not simply because it was fashioned by him in the same metre and style as the lays on native themes, but because he transformed it in spirit

¹ London and New York, The Macmillan Company. 1906. pp. 184 ff.

throughout to accord with British notions of fairyland.

“From Hades, evidently, the scene of the old classical story has been transferred to fairy-land; the king of the Celtic Otherworld is substituted for Pluto. References in Chaucer’s Merchant’s Tale to ‘Pluto, that is king of fayerye,’ and in Dunbar’s ‘Golden Targe’ to ‘Pluto, the elrich incubus, in cloak of green,’ attest the familiarity of the mediæval English and Scotch with this new conception of the lord of the dead. Certain other classical stories (e. g. Pyramus and Thisbe, and Narcissus) were dealt with in old French poems sometimes called lays; but no one of them presents the peculiar situation in ‘Orfeo,’ where the Celtic spirit has quite dispossessed the ancient and permeated the whole account.

“The French lay of Orpheus, from which ‘Orfeo’ is translated, is now lost; but we have references enough to it in other works to es-

tablish its previous existence. One, in the French prose romance of Lancelot, is of unusual interest. King Bademagus, we read, ‘was seated in an arm-chair of ivory, which was very beautiful, and before him was a harper who played (*notoit*) the lay of Orpheus; and it pleased the king so much to listen that there was no one who dared say a word.’”

I am indebted to Professor W. H. Schofield for permission to quote the foregoing paragraphs and for encouragement in the preparation of this little volume; to Dr. K. G. T. Webster for interpretations of difficult phrases, although the restrictions of metre have occasionally forced me to disregard them; and to Professor L. B. R. Briggs for his kindly critical judgment of the verse.

E. E. H.

Stoughton Hall, Cambridge,
December tenth, 1909.

WE often read with new delight
The lays that clerks would have
us know,

For lays there are that sing aright
Each wondrous thing of long ago:
Some are of weal, and some of woe,
And some of joy and gentle mirth,
And some of guile and treacherous foe,
And some the strangest haps of earth;

Some are of jests and ribaldry,
And some there are of fairy lore;
But most of all, as men may see,
They sing of love and trials sore.
In Britain in the days of yore
The harpers writ that men should praise
The gallant deeds that were before —
Of such the Britons made their lays.

And that we all should featly hold
In heart the mirth of elder days,
Some took their harps and gaily told
Of olden loves in tender lays.

I know not all their subtle ways;
I tell the little that I know;
So hearken, lords, your poet prays,
And I will sing of Orfeo.

Sir Orfeo, a king was he,
And in his time a mighty man,
Stalwart and strong and masterly,
A kind and courteous Christian.
To King Pluto his lineage ran,
His mother from Queen Juno sprung;
Men called them gods when time began
For lofty deeds they did and sung.

Orfeo most of any king
Loved a harper and his lay;
Every harper there might sing,
Honoured if he chose to stay.

And the king himself would play,
Singing with a merry mind.

And, as all the gleemen say,
A better harper none could find.

None before him was, I trow,
Or in after days will be
Held the peer of Orfeo
When he struck his harp. And he
Who could hear that minstrelsy
Would have deemed his spirit were
Housed in Heaven, such melody
Was it, and such joy to hear.

Thrace they named his stout demesne,
Then the strongest of cities;
With him dwelt his gracious queen,
Called the Lady Heurodis,
Fairest of all fair ladies;
Naught surpassed her gentleness,
Full of love and courtesies;
None can tell her loveliness.

And in the merry month of May
When day is fraught with happy hours,
When wintry storms have passed away,
And every field is full of flowers,
When clustered blossoms deck the bowers,
And morn is made to spend in sport,
Sweet Heurodis went from her towers
With two fair maidens of the court,

And out into the air of spring,
To revel in a grove, and see
The lovely blossoms bourgeoning,
And linnets piping cheerily.
At last, beneath a spreading tree,
They sat them down in grasses deep,
And soon — the maids watched at her
knee —
The queen was lying fast asleep.

They feared to waken her too soon,
So let her lie in sweet repose.

She slept till it was afternoon,
And morn had gone, as morning goes;
Then sudden with a cry she rose
And burst in tears of wild despair,
And wrung her hands, and showered blows
Upon her breast, and tore her hair.

Her jewelled robe she seized and rent,
For she was frantic in her pain.
The maids in their bewilderment
No longer dared with her remain,
But to the palace ran again
And summoned every squire and knight,
And bade them haste with might and main
To aid their mistress in her plight.

Knights, pages, squires, and ladies too,
And damsels hasten from the wall;
Into the orchard quick they go,
And, fearful of what may befall,

They lift and bear her to the hall
And moaning on her pillows lay;
Yet wild and heedless still of all
Ever she strove to flee away.

Sir Orfeo, when he was told,
Was as he ne'er before had been;
With all his knights he entered bold
Into the chamber of the queen,
But when he saw, he cried in teen,
“Ah, dearest wife, what aileth thee?
Thee joyless I have never seen,
Yet now thou wailest dreadfully.

“Thy lovely body, once so bright,
Is bruised as if thou wished thee dead.
Alas! alas! how wan and white
Thy little mouth that was so red!
And dark with blood thy nails have shed
Thy fingers that were erst as snow!
Thy lovely eyes are full of dread
And gaze as if I were thy foe!

“ Cease, Dearest, I implore thee now
These cries that all the palace fill,
And tell me what hath been, and how,
Or who hath done thee aught of ill.”

At last she ceased and lay full still,
And weeping bitter tears of woe,
She answered at his royal will,
“ Alas! my lord, Sir Orfeo,

“ Since we were first together, naught
Hath marred our life; no smallest sign;
But we have loved as love we ought;
Thou art my life, and I am thine.

Now do thy best and do not pine,
For we must part, and I to doom!”

“ Alas!” he cried, and “ woe is mine!
Where dost thou go, Love, and to whom?

“ Whither thou goest I will go,
And where I go thou too shalt fare!”

“ Nay, nay, my lord; thou dost not know:
My doom no mortal man may share.

This morn, as I was lying there
Asleep beneath an orchard-tree,
Two gallant horsemen, young and fair,
Rode to my feet, and bent the knee,

“ And bade me come with haste and speed
To parley with their lord the king.
But I replied I durst not heed,
Nor would I come for any thing.
Then they departed galloping,
And came the king with all his court:
Knights and fair damsels in a ring,
All clothed in white of wondrous sort.

“ I never in my life before
Have seen such creatures as they were.
Upon his head the monarch wore
A crown, but nought of gold was there:
It was a precious jewel rare,
And blazed as brightly as the sun;
And when he came, he spoke me fair,
And though I wept, he placed me on

“A steed. And so I rode away
Upon a palfrey by his side.
He brought me to his palace gay;
More beautiful I never spied.
He showed me castles, rivers wide,
Towers, and vast forests, mead and plain.
Again to horse, again we ride,
And so he brought me home again.

“And hither to our orchard borne
He let me down and said to me,
‘See, lady, that to-morrow morn
Thou art beneath this self-same tree;
Then thou shalt go with us and be
For aye with us in fairy land;’
And if thou failest, woe to thee,
For thou shalt feel the fairies’ hand!’

“‘Where’er thou art thy limbs shall fail,
No man shalt thou find piteous;

Thou shalt be torn with tooth and nail,
And would thou hadst returned with
us!'"

When Orfeo had heard, he was
Distraught, and moaned, "Alas! my life,
Dearer than life, and must I thus
Lose thee, my queen, my love, my wife?"

He sought for counsel: all were dumb,
For none could proffer words of good.
At last the morrow morn had come,
And Orfeo in armour stood
With hundreds of his knightlihood,
Each armed and harnessed, stout and grim;
They sallied forth into the wood
And girt about the queen and him.

In close array they stood at guard
And swore upon their weapons keen
They each should die upon the sward
Ere aught should come and take the queen.

Yet from their circle, and unseen,
The woeful Heurodis was won.

Alas! naught was where she had been,
And none could tell where she had gone.

Then there was wailing wild and dread;

The king into his chamber went,
And oft he swooned upon her bed,

And made such dole and such lament
His very life was wellnigh spent

Ere he could find a space for words;

Then woefully he rose, and sent
For all his barons, earls, and lords.

When they had come in solemn train,

"My lords," he said, "all ye have seen;
Hear now: my steward I ordain

To rule throughout my broad demesne.

He shall be lord as I have been,
And I must wander hence forlorn,

For I have lost the fairest queen
And sweetest lady ever born.

“ No other lady shall I see;
Forth must I fare on woeful quest
To dwell where never man may be,
Of beasts and birds to be the guest.
And when ye know my soul has rest,
Call then yourselves a parliament,
And choose a king as seems you best.
Do all as this my testament.”

Then there was wailing in the hall;
Men wept as there were no surcease,
And not a man among them all
Might speak for tears. Upon their knees
They knelt and made their woeful pleas,
Beseeching him he would not go,
Else were they desolate. But, “ Cease,”
Answered the king; “ it shall be so!”

And so his kingdom he forsook;
He had no kirtle and no hood;
A simple palmer’s cloak he took;
No shoes he had, no store of food.

But with his harp he sadly strode
Barefooted from the castle gate,
Alone to wander where he would.
Alas! how woeful was his state!

Alas! the wailing in the hall,
When he that had been king with crown,
Went like a beggar from them all.

In poverty he left the town;
Through wood and waste and dreary down
And towards the wilds he set his face;
Now found he deserts bleak and brown
And naught to ease his woeful case.

He that had worn but garments gay
And slumbered in a purple bed,
Now on the barren heather lay,
His couch with leaves and grasses spread.
He that had castles turreted,
Rivers, and forests, fields, and flowers,
Now had the snow and sleet instead,
And passed in woe his weary hours.

He that had scores of gentle knights
And ladies at his beck and call,
Now saw but dread unhappy sights,
Serpents and beasts that creep and crawl.
He that had supped in bower and hall
On dainty dishes and sweet fruits,
Now must he dig to find a small
Repast of herbs and bitter roots.

In summer, fruits of every kind
He had, and berries from the bough;
In winter, nothing could he find
But roots and leaves beneath the snow.
His form was bent, his pace was slow,
And he was worn by tempests sore.
Ah, who can tell the pain and woe
This king endured ten years and more!

His beard, that once was black and trim,
Was white, and lengthened to his knee;
His harp that ever solaced him,
He hid within a hollow tree;

And when the day was clear and free
He took it forth, and musing played,
And when the gentle melody
Was echoed far through gorse and glade,

The wildest creatures hidden there
For very joy about him played,
And all the birds from everywhere
Came forth and heard; for all obeyed
The witching music that he made,
Such perfect melody it was;
And when he ceased, they fled afraid
And hid them, wild and timorous.

And oft on dewy summer morns
Sir Orfeo beheld at hand
The fairy king, and heard the horns
Of hunting, and his shouting band
A-ranging wide across the land
With barking hounds; yet never game
He saw them take, nor heard a stand,—
Nor never knew he whence they came.

He saw across the hazy heights
A mighty host another day:
A thousand well-accoutréed knights
Went riding ready for the fray.
Bright were their ranks, with large display
Of gorgeous banners gaily blent;
Each brandished sword in that array,—
Yet never knew he where they went.

Again, he saw a wondrous rout
Of knights and ladies dancing free,
In quaint attire, and in and out
They wove and wandered daintily,
To sound of pipes and minstrelsy
And every kind of music sweet.
One day he saw a galaxy
Of ladies ride by his retreat;

Gentle and sweet they were, he wist,
And not a man rode in their train;
Each had a falcon on her wrist,
And to the river in the plain

They passed. The prey rose up amain,
Cormorants, herons, mallards flew;

The falcons soared with proud disdain,
Stooped, and each hawk his quarry slew.

“ Ho!” laughed the king, “ there is fair
game!

I too will see their gay intent,
For I was wont to do the same.”

He rose in haste and thither went,
And to a beauteous lady bent
His steps, when lo! he starts, he sees
Dumb with a like astonishment,
His stolen queen, sweet Heurodis.

For when she saw that it was he
She neither spoke nor uttered cry,
He was so spent with misery
That once had been so rich and high.
And then she wept as if to die,
But quick the others caught her rein,

And closed about, and made her fly,
And would not let her there remain.

“ Alas! alas!” he gan to cry,
“ Why will not death dispel my pain?
Alas! alas! would I could die
Now I have seen my love again.
Alas, that I must live, who fain
Would perish! for I dared not speak
To her, nor she to me. Ah, vain
Is life; alas! my heart will break!”

“ But nay,” he cried at last, “ not so:
I too shall wend, tide what betide,
Whither these gentle ladies go,
And learn the spot where they abide!”
He took his cloak and harp, and hied
Him forth, his harp upon his back,
Nor stock nor stone could turn aside
His footsteps from that beaten track.

In at a rock the ladies rode,
And fearlessly he followed fast.
When far into the rock he strode,
It grew more bright, and so at last
Into a far countree he passed,
Bright as the fairest summer sun:
All smooth and plain and green and vast,
For hills and valleys were there none.

Amid the land a castle tall
And rich and proud and wondrous high
Uprose, and all the outmost wall
Shone as a crystal to the eye.
A hundred towers lit up the sky,
Of diamond all battled stout;
And buttresses rose up near by
Arched with red gold and broad about.

All the bonsour was carved in stone
With every beast and every wight,
And all within the castle shone
And sparkled with unearthly light.

The meanest pillars to the sight
Seemed every whit of burnished gold.
And all that land was warm and bright,
For when our earth is dark and cold,

The jewelled stones shed forth a light
Like sunbeams on a summer's day.
None may describe that wondrous sight
Or sculptured work so proud and gay;
But one would think that rich array
Were of the courts of Paradise.

Therein the ladies led the way;
He followed fast in sweet surprise.

When at the gate, Sir Orfeo
Knocked, and the porter came anear
And asked what he would have him do.
“ Parfay, I am a minstrel here,”
He said, “ to please thy lord with cheer,
If he will deign to summon me.”

The porter lent a willing ear
And led him in the castle free.

There as he gazed his glances fell
On many marvels all around;
Folk long thought dead were by a spell
Brought hither, and as living found:
Some headless stood upon the ground,
Some had no arms, and some were torn
With dreadful wounds, and some lay
bound
Fast to the earth in hap forlorn.

And some full-armed on horses sat,
And some were strangled as at meat,
And some were drowned as in a vat,
And some were burned with fiery heat,
Wives lay in child-bed, maidens sweet
Were there, and other marvels more;
Each wondrous wight was at his feet
As each had slumbered long before.

Each thus was stolen out of life,
For such the fairies seize and keep.

And there he saw his darling wife,
Sweet Heurodis, as one asleep
Beneath a tree in grasses deep,
For by her garb he knew it all;
And when he saw, he fain would weep,
But entered bold into the hall.

And there he saw a seemly thing,
A tabernacle fair and light,
Whereunder sat the fairy king,
Near him his queen, a lovely wight.
Their crowns, their garments, glistened
bright;
He could not gaze, so hot they shone;
And when he saw that noble sight,
He knelt him down before the throne,

And said, "Lord, if thou wilt allow,
My melody shall pleasure thee."
The king replied, "What man art thou
That hither comes? and for what plea?

I did not send, nor none with me
Hath bid thee come to fairy lond.

My faith, I never yet did see
Since I was crowned, a man so fond

“As thou who durst us so defy,
And comest lacking summons true.”

“Lord,” answered he, “know this; that I
As a poor simple minstrel sue.
And, sir, it is our custom to
Seek out the hall of many a lord;
Though we be welcome to but few,
Sweet is the music we afford.”

He sat him down before the king
And all the court in rich array;
He took his merry harp to sing,
And when he gan that blissful lay,
All crowded to his feet, and they
That were without the palace, lo!
They came to hear the minstrel play,
To hear the lay of Orfeo.

The king was pleased and sat full still,
Right gladly did he hear the glee;
The lovely queen with right good will
Joyed in the lovely melody.
And when it ceased at last, "Thy fee,"
The king exclaimed, "for, harper mine,
I love thy tender minstrelsy:
Ask what thou wilt, and it is thine;

"Largess I proffer for thy task;
Speak now, what shall I give to thee?"
"Sir," answered he, "one thing I ask;
This — that thou wilt bestow on me
The lady 'neath the orchard-tree
A-slumbering in grasses deep."
"Nay," quoth the king, "that cannot be;
A sorry couple ye would keep.

"For thou art rough, and foul, and lean,
But lovely as a rose is she.
'T were lothly thing to let a queen
Be partner of thy company."

"Oh, sir," he cried, "thy courtesy,
But surely 't were a fouler thing
To hear thy lips lie thus to me!
So, sir, my boon, as thou art king!

"I have but asked of thee my due,
And thou must needs requite me so."
The king replied, "Aye, it is true;
Then take her by the hand and go.
Joy have of her and never woe!"

He thanked him sweet, and by the hand
He led his wife; thus Orfeo
And Heurodis left fairy land.

They wandered from that woeful place
That wrought them so much misery,
Along the way that led to Thrace,
His high demesne, his own city;
And no man knew that it was he.
Then paused they at the city's end;
For fear of fraud and treachery
That day no further would they wend.

In at a beggar's, poor and old,
Who dwelt a space beyond the wall,
He and his lady turned, and told
How he was but a minstrel-thrall;
He asked the beggar news of all
That had befallen: who was king,
Or who the ruler in the hall:
The beggar told him everything.

How the fair queen was rapt away
Ten years agone, by fairy spell;
And how the king the self-same day
Had gone; none knew where he might
dwell;
And how the steward ruled full well;
And many other things he told.
Then Orfeo left the beggar's cell
And Heurodis with the beggar old.

Straightway the beggar's rags he took;
He took his merry harp, and went

Into the town, where all might look
Upon his body soiled and bent.
Men laughed aloud in merriment;
The ladies, earls, and barons said,
“Lo, see the man! his hair is sprent
Like moss about his shaggy head;

“His beard is fallen to his feet
Like weathered ivy tumbling down!”
There as he went, he chanced to meet
His steward coming through the town.
Then loud he cried, and plucked his gown,
“Sir steward, hearken, pity me!
I am a harper of renown;
Ah, help me in my misery!”

The steward straightway answered, “Come!
Thou shalt share aught I can bestow.
Every good harper is welcome
For my lord’s sake Sir Orfeo.”

Straight to the castle then they go,
And all the lords sat down to meat;
 Trumpets and tabours blare and blow;
Gleemen and crowders sang full sweet.

And much of melody they had,
 But Orfeo heard it silently.
When all was still, the steward bade
 Him take his harp and sing his glee.
 He touched it soft, and melody
Sweeter than ever tongue can tell,
 Delighted all that company.
The steward heard and marked it well.

He knew the harp, and said, "Say now,
 Minstrel, as thou hast fear of Hell,
Where gottest thou thy harp, and how?
 I pray thee haste and quickly tell!"
 "Lord," quoth he, "in a desert fell
As I was wandering one morn,
 I found within a dismal dell
A corse by angry lions torn.

“The wolves had gnawed him flesh and
bone;

His harp was lying in the snow.

‘Tis full ten weary years agone.”

“Oh,” cried the steward, “dost thou know
That was my lord, Sir Orfeo!

Alas! now am I all forlorn.

My lord is lost! ah, me is woe!

Ah, would that I had ne’er been born!”

He fell a-swooning to the ground;

His barons caught him up again,

And sought to heal his woeful wound,

And give him comfort in his pain,

But still he mourned, for all was vain.

And when Sir Orfeo well knew

His steward’s love had not a stain,

He rose, and spake, and nearer drew.

“Sir steward, hearken now and hear:
If I were Orfeo the king,

And had sore suffered many a year,
Enduring every cruel thing,
And by my lays at last could bring
My queen from fairy land again,
And now had left her sorrowing
In a poor hovel in the plain,

“Sheltered with but a beggar poor,
And all alone had come to thee
In poverty to try thy door,
To test thy faith and loyalty,
And found thee constant still to me,—
Sure thou shouldst never rue the day!
But for thy fealty, thou shouldst be
The king when I had passed away.”

Then all who sat within the hall
Knew that it was the king aright.
The steward ran to him, to fall
Down at his feet in dumb delight,

And all his lordings at the sight
Crowded about his feet, to cling
And shout for joy with all their might,
“Thou art our lord, sir, and our king!”

Sure all were glad when they had heard;
Quickly they led him in with glee,
And bathed his face and shaved his beard
And tired him as a king should be;
And then with mirth and jollity
They brought the queen into the town,
With every sort of minstrelsy!
Lord, how the tale went up and down!

For very joy the people wept
That he was come so safe and sound;
For very joy they danced and leapt;
His soul was healed of every wound;
Again Sir Orfeo was crowned;
Again sweet Heurodis was queen;
In love they lived, till death they found;
Then the steward ruled their wide demesne.

In Britain, after many a day,
The harpers learned this wondrous thing,
And made thereof this pleasant lay,
And named it for the harper-king.
And so of Orfeo I sing:
Good is the lay, and sweet the air;
Thus cometh mirth from sorrowing,—
God grant us all as well to fare.

DEC 24 1909

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